

# Objective art

## Wood sculptures evoke familiar, disturbing

BY GARRETT HOLG

On first entering the vast, lofty-ceilinged fourth floor exhibition space at the Chicago Cultural Center these days, the dark, brooding forms of Ursula von Rydingsvard's massive wood sculptures seem almost cozy. The feeling doesn't last long. After a while, one hardly notices the elegant trimmings of the grand hall. The brute bulk and rawness of the artist's powerfully compelling works demands attention and gets it.

During the last 20 years von Rydingsvard, who is, especially known for monumental outdoor pieces, has become an increasingly important figure in contemporary sculpture. Chicagoans received an introduction to her work in 1991 when it was included in the exhibition "Sowers of Myth," which also appeared at the cultural center. Now, for the first comprehensive traveling exhibition of the artist's indoor work, Wisconsin's Madison Art Center has brought together 14 sculptures dating from 1976 to 1997.

Although highly abstract, von Rydingsvard's sculptures, which will remain at the cultural center through Jan. 31, often suggest elements of landscape, such as an eroded mountain side, or parts of human anatomy. While the artist insists such references are unintentional, many of her works do represent recognizable everyday objects, such as a basket, ladle,

spoon, shovel or plow. Simple tools such as these loomed large in her childhood.

Von Rydingsvard was born to a Polish mother and Ukrainian father in Germany in 1942. Her devout Catholic family survived during World War II as forced laborers on collective farms. When the war ended, they were shuttled around a series of refugee camps, living in austere, starkly furnished, soldier-built wooden structures. Her mother tied a spoon on a string around her daughter's neck so it wouldn't get lost. When she was 8 years old, her family emigrated to America.

Although reluctant to put too much emphasis on these early experiences as a source for her imagery,

von Rydingsvard confided in a recent interview. "There's something in my growing up that tends to enable utilitarian objects. You can lean on them. You can trust them. They can actually do things for you, not just physically in terms of enabling you to feed yourself, but also psychologically. There's a kind of solace," she says, "that one gets from them—almost as though they could be icons of sorts."

One form that recurs throughout von Rydingsvard's work is the vessel. And, while she readily confesses she's not sure she really understands its significance, she has used it in a variety of ways as a point of

departure for numerous works, including cones, baskets and bowls. Each evokes myriad metaphors associated with the vessels, which the artist sees mainly as containers of emotions, but which she's also described as mouths.

Among the most stunning of these objects is "Krasavica" (1992-1993), a work consisting of five bowl-like forms, joined in a row, standing waist-high and against the wall. There is an amazing sense of suppleness about these bold, deeply carved forms; their top edges curl over and form a spoutlike pucker. They seem like slightly withered flower blossoms, or a row of teeth. The artist likens them to pockets, or to someone pulling the lower lip over the upper lip.



JOHN H. WHITE/SUN-TIMES PHOTOS

Sculptures by Ursula von Rydingsvard, including "Lace Mountains," are at the Chicago Cultural Center.